

# **'VIRTUAL' LEARNING COMMUNITIES BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: PERCEPTIONS OF TERTIARY CHINESE LANGUAGE AND NON-LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

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## ***ABSTRACT***

As class contact times are reduced as a result of fiscal restraints in the modern tertiary sector, language instructors are placed in the position of having to find new ways to provide experience and continuity in language learning. Extending 'learning communities' — sites of learner knowledge exchange, exposure to diverse learning styles and strategies, and mutual support — beyond the classroom is one solution to maintaining successful linguistic competencies amongst learners. This, however, can conflict with the diverse extra-curricular commitments faced by tertiary students. The flexibility of web-based learning platforms provides one means of overcoming these obstacles. This study investigates learner perceptions of the use of the Web-CT® platform's CMC tools as a means of extending the community of learning in tertiary Chinese language and non-language courses. Learner responses to Likert and open-ended questionnaires show that flexibility and reduction of negative affect are seen as significant benefits to 'virtual' interaction and communication, although responses are notably stronger in the non-language compared with the language cohort. While both learner cohorts acknowledge positive learning outcomes, CMC is not seen to consistently further interpersonal rapport beyond that established in the classroom. Maintaining a balance between web-based and classroom learning emerges as a concern, especially amongst language learners.

## ***INTRODUCTION***

The tertiary education community is in the process of accommodating to the dynamic changes in approaches to learning which have emerged in the past two decades. The traditional teacher-fronted lecture format, where knowledge is imparted to students, endures but is under progressive challenge from contemporary pedagogical approaches that place the learner at the centre of the learning process (Aggarwal & Bento, 2000, p.2; Hesketh et al., 1996, p.52; Jonassen, Peck & Wilson, 1999, p.3-4; Oliver, 2000, p.19; Tompkins, Perry & Lippincott, 1998, p.4). Coinciding with this change in the pedagogical paradigm, technological advances have seen the boundaries of the tertiary classroom extended beyond the classroom and even the campus. Further to this, important sociopolitical factors have augmented the impact of such changes. In response to government fiscal policies,

class contact times continue to be reduced in tertiary institutions along with staff-student ratios (Maring, Wiseman & Myers, 1997, p.198). Likewise, work, family and other extracurricular commitments faced by modern tertiary learners have further reduced opportunities for face-to-face contact among learners outside of class.

Advances in computer-mediated communication (CMC), however, have provided a generally accessible, convenient and modern means of nurturing and continuing the learning experience beyond the constraints of locale and schedule (Chapman, 1999, p.10; Gordin et al., 1996, p.2; Grubb & Hines, 2000, p.367; Haythornthwaite et al., 2000, p.7; Johnson, Sutton & Poon, 2000, p.510; Leng et al., 1999, p.34; McCormack & Jones, 1998, p.20-21; Pena-Shaff, Martin & Gay, 2001, p.42). For language learners in particular, CMC offers the potential for:

a more complete learning experience ... When students know that they can reach their teacher and classmates outside of the scheduled class times, they begin to feel they are part of a larger entity. In many traditional classrooms, the isolation of the students from one another is a barrier to improving language skills because they often fail to make good use of their classmates as communication partners ... Adding computer-mediated communication activities can give students a sense of belonging because they begin to know and communicate with classmates both inside and outside of class ... outside of the small circle of 'classroom' friends they usually associate with. (Daniels and Brooks, 1999, p.84)

Contrary to prevailing lay discourses berating its insularity, the Internet is seen to provide an opportunity for the expansion and development of social interaction between learners (Hammond, 1998, p.332). Jonassen, Peck & Wilson (1999, p.118-19) state:

Telecommunications connect learners within the same class ... in order to pursue some common learning objective ... The Internet can become the communications vehicle that both liberates and ties learners together, including students and teachers, into coherent learning communities. The Internet can be part of the glue that keeps people connected — talking with each other, noticing and appreciating differences, working out divergent views, serving as role models and audiences for one another. The education future portended by the Internet, therefore, is not isolated and targeted to individuals. Rather, it is a community-centered future that accommodates each person through the workings of the larger community of learners ... Learning communities existed long before networking technologies came into being, but the potential scale of adoption expands with the technologies available.

Thus, current research notes the beneficial role of CMC in the promotion of 'learning communities' (Chester & Gwynne, 1998, p.5; McCormack & Jones, 1998, p.198; McKenzie & Murphy, 2000, p.7,8; Malaga, 2000, p.305; Tetiwat & Igbaria, 2000, p.20). Such 'learning communities', as spaces where learners "work together toward their common goals ... share information in the pursuit of a meaningful, consequential task ... [and reflect] on the knowledge constructed and the processes used to construct it by the learners", are clearly learner-centred (Daniels and Brooks, 1999, p.84). CMC offers to these communities of learning and learners "a powerful online tool that facilitates meaningful interactivity and high levels of conceptual engagement in higher education contexts" (Whittle, Dal Pozzo and Gregory, 2000, p.59). According to Gerbic (2000, p.66):

Its discursive character means that there are opportunities for dialogue, debate, and collaborative learning. The plasticity of the medium means that ideas can be reshaped through feedback and further reflection. Teachers may assume a lower profile as student to student conversation takes over.

The benefits of collaborative learning and engendering a sense of community are well recognised (Barab, Thomas & Merrill, 2001, p.108; Johnson & Johnson, 1985, p.115-120; 1999, p.190; Kearney, 1993, p.3; Knight & Bohlmeier, 1990, p.8-9; Priest, 2000, p.42; Slavin, 1990, p.111). Research to date has demonstrated a clear potential for CMC in this regard. Few studies, however, specifically target the experience of tertiary language learning, despite the special demands of the discipline and, in particular, the social-interactive reality of language use. This study, therefore, employs learner survey data to investigate the contribution of CMC to the sense of learning community amongst tertiary Chinese language learners.

### Synchronous vs asynchronous CMC

CMC can be synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous tools—where communication is real-time, ostensibly face-to-face but without the faces — available in virtually all commercial CMC platforms and familiar to the vast majority of tertiary learners, include 'chat' and 'whiteboard'. Asynchronous counterparts — where communicative responses are delayed—include email and 'discussion boards'.

Synchronous tools are particularly important in distance education where there is no face-to-face instructor-learner and learner-learner contact. They, too, can play a role in extending learning communities beyond the classroom but have the distinct disadvantage of temporal inflexibility and, as such, merely replicate contact tutorials without the social and discursive benefits of face-to-face social contact.

Fundamental to employing CMC as an adjunct to classroom contact is the flexibility and convenience it provides for the learner. Indeed, these are the qualities that make asynchronous CMC tools useful in such contexts. Learners, many of whom nowadays have manifold extracurricular commitments, are free to contribute at times convenient to them (Badger, 2000, p.126; Chapman, 1999, p.6; McCormack & Jones, 1998, p.199; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p.48; Salmon, 2000, p.17-18). They can log-on at home after their casual employment 'graveyard shift' or at the university library during a break. Such flexibility in time and place provides "space to think, increased reflection and more thoughtfully constructed ideas and new knowledge" (Gerbic, 2000, p.66).

The permanent written record of the discourse also generates opportunity for critical reflection and contemplation (Barab, Thomas & Merrill, 2001, p.110; Gerbic, 2000, p.66). Pena-Shaff, Martin & Gay's (2001, p.65) study of CMC use in tertiary non-language courses finds that:

asynchronous discussion environments increased the opportunities for participants to develop sophisticated cognitive skills such as self-reflection, critical thinking and indepth analysis of the course content, supporting the purposeful construction of meaning. The need to articulate one's own argument in this type of text-based environment encourages students to engage in analytical and reflective action. This process helps students construct purposeful arguments and transmit them to an audience.

There are, of course, potential pitfalls to asynchronous CMC. These include technical failures, such as server failure; economic burden, such as establishing and maintaining home computers; and Internet costs, computer illiteracy and other access and equity issues (Hammond, 1998, p.332; Kemery, 2000, p.237; McCormack & Jones, 1998, p.200-201; McKenzie & Murphy, 2000, p.8). Provision of, and access to, university computer resources are crucial to counter such potentialities. Moreover, equity and access is on the whole improved for disabled and minority groups (Chester & Gwynne, 1998, p.4; McCormack & Jones, 1998, p.200).

Other pitfalls can include low contribution rates amongst learners which can discourage motivation amongst those who do contribute, leading to a snowballing loss of interest, and the delays inherent to asynchronous communication which extend the time-frame — yet may improve the final outcome — in problem solving (Badger, 2000, p.126; Benson & Zwart, 2000, p.430; English & Yazdani, 1999, p.11; Kemery, 2000, p.230; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p.48). The development of a core group of contributors, or dominating 'voices', can also be problematic (McKenzie & Murphy, 2000, p.7). Browsing without contributing, 'lurking', is also considered by some a down-side of discussion boards (Kemery, 2000, p.239).

However, passive involvement and non-contribution are also a feature of face-to-face learning, and lurking may merely be a reflection of multiform learning styles (Haythornthwaite et al, 2000, p.11; McCormack & Jones, 1998, p.200; Salmon, 2000, p.29).

Nevertheless, as an adjunct to face-to-face classroom contact, asynchronous CMC offers the distinct benefits of flexibility and convenience to the tertiary learner. This investigation of the role of CMC in promoting learning communities in tertiary language learning, therefore, focuses on evaluation of the asynchronous mode.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

### Participants and materials

The study investigated the use of CMC in one first-year-level Chinese language course, and one first-year-level and one second-year-level non-language course, all convened and taught by the researcher. The non-language cohort is included in order to determine whether course discipline has any impact on learner perceptions, given the special requirements of language learning. The course details are as follows:

Course	Title	Enrolment
CHIN2100	Spoken Chinese 1B (for zero-beginners)	59
ASIA1410	Issues in Chinese Culture	17
ASIA2420	Traditional Chinese Literature & Society	15

The learner cohort was extremely diverse. Reflecting the contemporary Australian tertiary community demographic, a broad range of ethnicity, English language competency, computer literacy, ages and gender were represented.

The courses were delivered using a combination of face-to-face (FTF) and Web formats. FTF delivery comprised 4 hours per week for the language course and 2 hours per week for the non-language courses. The learners were expected to spend another hour on the Web-delivered (CMC) component. For all courses, course profiles, materials, and CMC tools were delivered using the WebCT® Version 3.1 platform, the on-line platform used by The University of Queensland. Learners were trained in the use of the WebCT platform (including its CMC tools) during an hour-long training session in the first week of the course. A small number of late enrolers were trained individually.

The WebCT platform is an integrated web-based interface that allows posting of course content (course syllabus and learning modules), provides built-in communication tools (email, chat, whiteboard and e-discussions), along with

# evaluation and study tools:

Simply put, WebCT is an integrated collection of CGI scripts, images, forms, pages, and JavaScript and Java applets that work with a Web server to allow the creation, maintenance, and use of a Web-based classroom. This collection of tools and materials allows a class designer to build and maintain a Web-based classroom and students to use that classroom. (McCormack & Jones, 1998, p.346-347)

One drawback with this version of Web-CT is that its communication tools do not readily accommodate Chinese script. This limits their application to spoken language courses, where romanised Chinese (*Hanyu Pinyin*) is employed.

In all courses, the CMC component involved contributing to e-discussions driven by topics/questions posted each week by the lecturer. Learners' contribution to the e-discussions was factored into the performance component of their assessment (10-20% of final grade). For the language course, discussions were conducted in *Pinyin* and, at times, English, while non-language course e-discussions were conducted solely in English. Examples from each follow (Figures 1 & 2).

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**Subject: Fruits galore!**

**Message no. 44:**

Posted by Guy RAMSAY

Mon Aug 27, 2001 13:53

Ni xihuan chi shenme shuiguo? Zai nar mai? Wo xihuan  
chi pingguo he xigua. Woolies you hen duo zhong!  
[shui'guo (shui3guo3) = fruits] ...

**Message no. 46:**

Posted by A.R.

Mon Aug 27, 2001 21:01

NIMEN HAO!!!! :) Wo jiao Andrew! Wo xihuan sh[u]iguo,  
xihuan d[uo] zhong! ... Woolies ba xiangjiao, pingguo, [m]ei he  
tao you gei wo xigua. Nimen ye qu Woolies mai shuiguo ma?  
O, dui le, jintian shangwu wo zai yi zhang zhuzhishang  
chi fan le. :)

**Message no. 47:**

Posted by M.Y.

Tue Aug 28, 2001 09:30

Wo xiang mai xinxian yingtao, tian putao. Woolies mei you  
hen duo zhong!!!! Wo shuo z[h]ongg[uo] de shu[i]g[uo] dique hen  
hao chi!!!! When I went to Taiwan I was just addicted  
to all the fruits they had. They were so yummy. I wish I  
could go back to there just want to eat fruits.

**Message no. 48:**

Posted by Guy RAMSAY

Tue Aug 28, 2001 10:55

A --- Woolies shenme dou you, shi ma?! Danshi Zhongguo  
shuiguo ne? ... Zai nali mai?

**Message no. 49:**

Posted by L.T.

Fri Aug 31, 2001 14:46

Woolies bu hao! Wo shi Coles ying ye yuan. Coles ye you  
hen d[uo] zhong de shui guo. Coles shi best!

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## Figure 1: E-discussion postings for CHIN2100

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**Subject: One Child Policy**

**Message no. 26:**

Posted by Guy Ramsay

Thu Mar 22, 2001 09:45

In the 'one-child' video (HQ766.5.C6C451984) we were  
introduced to two women - one a family planning officer  
and the other a women pregnant with her second child.  
Did you observe any evidence of traditional Chinese  
values reflected in either of these women's character?

**Message no. 27:**

Posted by S.D.

Mon Mar 26, 2001 11:57

One of the major tra[d]itional values that stood out to me  
was the way in which the pregn[ant] woman was coerced into  
having the abortion. The family planner simply brought  
the prefecture's leaders around to have a 'talk' with  
the pregnant woman. Which to me seems to be a very real  
and modern application of the principle of face ...

**Message no. 28:**

Posted by P.C.

Tue Mar 27, 2001, 19:31

I totally agree with Scott's remarks about the video and  
how traditional Chinese values are promin[ent] in both  
these women... I think the major aspect would be 'doing  
it for ones country' and closely followed by 'not losing  
face.'

: ) Penny ...

**Message no. 30:**

Posted by A.Y.

Wed Mar 28, 2001 15:34

Agreed with Penny... The bigger picture - acting for the  
good of the country seems to continue to be the  
underlying impetus for both of the women. The supervisor  
in her guidance and the expectant mother in her

submission. Indeed the supervisor[ 's] predominant emotion was of pride for her accomplishment for the country and not pity or empathy for the mother.

Message no. 40:

Posted by L.T.

Tue Apr 03, 2001 13, p.20

After watching the video I saw no tradition[al] role of women. Tradition[al]ly, women's role were to bare [sic] children, the more children you bare, the stronger your family will be. But in the video I saw the women was to hold the responsib[il]ity to do right for their country and comply to the one child policy. There was no traditional family value for a bigger family but ones face value in the community, as what penny stated.

Figure 2: E-discussion postings for ASIA1410

Each week learners were reminded about contributing to the e-discussions. Since the main rationale for employing the CMC format was to provide flexibility and allow time for learner reflection, the only time-limit placed on learner postings was the end of the teaching semester. The directions of the e-discussions were ultimately learner-driven. Only rarely did the lecturer contribute beyond the initial posting. This was inevitably in response to direct questioning on, for example, grammar or specific facts, and not to intervene in the direction of the e-discussions or comments made.

Learners also had access to a course-site email for private correspondence with their classmates and the lecturer. They were offered access to the chat function for their own use on request, but no learners in any of the courses chose to utilise it. Given that FTF discussions were already conducted during class contact, it was decided not to replicate this 'synchronic' activity electronically in any formal sense (chat and whiteboard).

### Evaluation procedure

In this study, learners lie at the centre of the learning community construct. Learner questionnaires ('2001 Student Evaluation Of Web Course' — Appendix 1) therefore provide an effective data source for evaluating CMC's role in promoting learning communities.

Hardcopy questionnaires were provided to learners two-thirds of the way through the course (weeks 8-9). Hardcopy formats were employed so as to engage learners who had elected not to utilise the Web platform. The questionnaire return rate for the language course was 76%, with the non-language courses averaging 72%. The questionnaires consisted of twenty-three Likert-type and five open-ended questions (Appendix 1). They evaluated all aspects of the Web delivery, including format, accessibility, delivery of course materials,

and CMC tools. The questions were tested beforehand on three School colleagues who research in teaching and learning, and two academic consultants from the university's Teaching and Educational Development Institute. This was to attenuate the inherent limitations in this form of data collection, namely, the potential for misinterpretation of questions, and vague, neutral responses (Anderson and Ramsay, 1999). The questionnaires were anonymous.

### RESULTS

This study draws on the responses obtained from the thirteen Likert questions (Questions 11-23) that specifically related to CMC ('e-discussions') and learning communities (Tables 1 & 2), along with those gained from the open-ended questions (Questions I-V). The Likert questions were coded thematically (as follows) and these themes were later employed to code the learners' open comments (Johnson, Sutton & Poon, 2000, p.514):

Question 11.	Flexibility	Question 18.	Preferences
Question 12.	Affect	Question 19.	Facilitation
Question 13.	Interest	Question 20.	Value of e-discussions
Question 14.	Reflection	Question 21.	Sense of community
Question 15.	Balance	Question 22.	Learning
Question 16.	Organisation	Question 23.	Learning style
Question 17.	Setting time-limits		

Trends were determined qualitatively on consideration of the Likert and open-ended data, and comparisons made across language and non-language learner cohorts.

Question number	Totals					Percentages				
	SA	A	N	D	SD	SA	A	N	D	SD
Q11	4	17	22	1	1	9	38	49	2	2
Q12	3	19	18	4	1	7	42	40	9	2
Q13	6	15	17	3	4	13	33	38	7	9
Q14	3	18	19	2	3	7	40	42	4	7
Q15	0	12	23	6	4	0	27	51	13	9
Q16	0	5	21	15	4	0	11	47	33	9
Q17	1	7	15	13	9	2	16	33	29	20
Q18	16	15	12	1	1	36	33	27	2	2
Q19	6	17	18	2	2	13	38	40	4	4
Q20	3	22	16	2	2	7	49	36	4	4
Q21	0	11	26	4	4	0	24	58	9	9
Q22	1	10	19	11	4	2	22	42	25	9
Q23	7	10	15	10	3	16	22	33	22	7

Table 1: Likert results for language learners (CHIN2100)

Question number	Totals					Percentages				
	SA	A	N	D	SD	SA	A	N	D	SD
Q11	11	7	3	1	1	48	30	13	4	4
Q12	10	8	2	3	0	43	35	9	13	0
Q13	5	11	5	2	0	22	48	22	9	0
Q14	12	5	4	2	0	52	22	17	9	0
Q15	6	10	3	4	0	26	43	13	17	0
Q16	0	0	4	15	4	0	0	17	65	17
Q17	0	4	7	5	7	0	17	30	22	30
Q18	3	7	7	5	1	13	30	30	22	4
Q19	5	10	7	1	0	22	43	30	4	0
Q20	5	11	6	0	1	22	48	26	0	4
Q21	4	6	9	4	0	17	26	39	17	0
Q22	0	4	7	9	3	0	17	30	39	13
Q23	1	4	9	8	1	4	17	39	35	4

Table 2: Likert results for non-language learners (ASLA1410 + ASLA2420)

SA = strong agree

A = agree

N = neutral

SD = strong disagree

D = disagree

### Flexibility

(Q11: I like the flexibility of e-discussions)

Language learners were evenly spread across positive and neutral (SA + A = 47%; N = 49%) responses to the flexibility offered by the e-discussions. Only two learners specifically commented on this theme, noting, "Can add to them at any time" and "Able to access at anytime when I am free". By contrast, most learners from the non-language courses (SA + A = 78%) responded favourably to the flexibility offered by the e-discussions. Only one, however, specifically commented on this theme, noting, "It's a lot easier to be able to participate at any time in the discussions".

### Affect

(Q12: E-discussions are more relaxed than in-class discussions)

A large number of learners from the language course (SA + A = 49%) found the e-discussions more relaxed than FTF discussions, yet a notable number remained neutral (N = 40%). Only one learner specifically commented in support: "Able to express my opinion freely". By contrast, most learners from the non-language courses (SA + A = 78%) found the e-discussions more relaxed than FTF discussions. Only one, however, specifically commented in support, "Can discuss easily without being look[ed at] by other classmate[s]", with one unfavourable comment, "I would rather comment in class as I find participating in e-discussions

embarrassing because people can read it and probably think 'What is that person talking about!?!' whereas in class I can say anything and nobody really cares".

### Interest

(Q13: The e-discussions were interesting)

Once again, language learners were generally positive or neutral in expressing interest in the e-discussions (SA + A = 46%; N = 38%). There was general interest expressed amongst the non-language cohort toward the e-discussions (SA + A = 70%), but with some ambivalence evident (N = 22%).

### Reflection

(Q14: E-discussions allowed me time to think about my opinion on a topic)

Language learners were generally positive (SA + A = 47%) or neutral (N = 42%) toward the proposition that e-discussions allowed more time for reflection on contributions. By contrast, most learners from the non-language courses (SA + A = 74%) agreed that e-discussions allowed more time for reflection on contributions, although, again some ambivalence was expressed. Two (both supportive) comments were proffered, "The e-discussions gave time for one to think through their answers before typing them" and "Being able to ... have a good thought before answering the question [is] better than face-to-face in the class which might be difficult for some students to express the idea!".

### Balance

(Q15: There was an adequate balance of in-class and e-discussions)

There was general ambivalence amongst language learners (N = 51%) as to whether a balance between FTF and e-discussion was obtained. Two learners commented generally that "The web should not be a substitution to a normal class" and "If the web replaces real life practice in the tutes etc., it could be a problem". There was general agreement amongst most, but not all, learners from the non-language courses (SA + A = 69%; D = 17%) that a balance between FTF and e-discussion was obtained. One learner commented generally that "The web shouldn't be heavily relied on as a teaching tool", recommending "not to emphasise e-discussion on the same level as in-class participation".

**Organisation** (Q16: The e-discussions were not well organised)

There was notable ambivalence amongst language learners toward the organisation of the e-discussions. Two learners commented specifically, noting "Superfluous content" and "the threads are 'kludged'". No learners from the non-language courses felt that the e-discussions were poorly organised.

### Setting time-limits

(Q17: Students should have to contribute to the e-discussions within a set time-limit, eg. 3 days)

There appeared to be a mixture of resistance and ambivalence amongst learners from both the language cohort (SD + D = 49%; N = 33%) and the non-language cohort (SD + D = 52%; N = 30%) for setting immediate time-limits on postings. Yet six comments noting the low participation rate in the language course e-discussion were proffered, for example: "I did it once and no-one responded"; "I felt like I was talking to myself"; and "Find a way to get people to participate without making it compulsory". Two specific comments from the non-language cohort were against time-limits, one actually requesting extensions for postings beyond the end of the teaching semester, "I would like to be able to comment on any topic whenever, especially once more indepth study has been done ... (ie. during Swotvac)".

### Preferences

(Q18: I prefer face-to-face tutorials)

Whereas language learners expressed a notable preference for FTF learning (SA + A = 69%; SD + D = 4%), there was a spread of preferences expressed amongst learners from the non-language cohort (SA + A = 43%; SD + D = 26%; N = 30%) for and against FTF learning. Two specific comments were proffered from the language cohort expressing a preference for FTF learning: "[I] would prefer face to face discussions" and "I prefer human contact".

### Facilitation

(Q19: The e-discussions and website mailbox made it easy for me to discuss things with my classmates outside of class)

There was mostly support amongst language learners (SA + A = 51%) and learners from non-language cohort (SA + A = 65%) that CMC facilitates communication outside the classroom, with some notable ambivalence (N = 40% and 30% respectively). Two specific comments from the non-language cohort were proffered in support, while one noted the "limited interaction between students".

### Value of e-discussions

(Q20: It is good being able to continue in-class discussions in the e-discussions)

There was support (SA + A = 56%) with notable ambivalence (N = 36%) amongst language learners placing value on the extension of discussions beyond the classroom. Four comments were expressed (supportive) noting the value of sharing ideas, viewing classmates' language attempts and getting feedback. There

was clear support (SA + A = 70%) yet some ambivalence (N = 26%) amongst learners from the non-language cohort. The only specific comment proffered (supportive) noted, "I was able to see what [opinions] others had on my views".

### Sense of community

(Q21: E-discussions made me feel more 'part of the class')

There was strong ambivalence amongst language learners (N = 58%), and mixed ambivalence and support (N = 39%; SA + A = 43%) amongst learners from the non-language cohort that CMC facilitates communication outside the classroom. Only one specific comment was proffered (language cohort) stating, "Felt as part of a class".

### Learning

(Q22: I learnt very little from discussing things with my classmates outside of class)

There was notable ambivalence and mixed response (SA + A = 24%; N = 42%; SD + D = 34%) amongst language learners in regard to learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the largest number of specific comments from the language learners (9) acknowledged positive learning outcomes, for example: "Vocab learnt in class able to be used in everyday conversation"; "Practice making my own sentences and formulating my own ideas based on opinions"; "Learning new words by reading the e-discussion"; and "Any contact with the language is good, allows language to 'live'". There was some support for positive learning outcomes, again with notable ambivalence, (SD + D = 52%; N = 30%) amongst learners from the non-language cohort. Nevertheless, the vast majority of specific comments from the non-language learners (14) acknowledged positive learning outcomes, for example: "Getting other people's insight and interpretations ... opened my mind to different ideas ... helped me learn"; "Learning from other students [through e-discussions] [f]orces you to think about what you learnt that week, rather than a total revision at exam time"; and "Having a place to swap opinions is good. It is hard to find people with similar interests outside this class!". Three learners also commented on the added benefit of possessing "A written record of the discussion so you could look up any discussion that had happened during the semester, whereas in [FTF] tutorials there is no record of the discussion".

### Learning style

(Q23: I prefer to learn on my own)

There was a spread of preferences expressed both amongst language learners (SD + D = 29%; SA + A = 38%; N = 33%) and learners from the non-language

cohort (SD + D = 39%; SA + A = 21%; N = 39%) for and against collaborative learning, with language learners expressing less support compared to learners from non-language courses.

## DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the learner evaluations broadly support the findings of earlier studies that CMC increases flexibility, reduces negative affect and allows time for considered responses from learners. However, in this study, language learners appear much less convinced of these benefits when compared with learners from non-language courses, with a larger neutral response evident in the language learner cohort.

Results for both cohorts are more equivocal, however, in regard to promoting a sense of learning community amongst learners. A clear trend appeared toward regarding CMC as a tool conducive for extending discussion beyond the classroom and that extending discussion beyond the classroom was a worthy exercise. Despite a low expression of disagreement, a large neutral response was nevertheless registered in both cohorts. This trend carried through to other learning-community-specific questions as well, most notably the ambivalence expressed toward the proposition that CMC fostered a sense of rapport amongst learners. While e-discussions may provide more opportunity for collaborative learning by extending discussion and the exchange of ideas beyond the classroom, it appears that e-discussions do not necessarily promote a sense of interpersonal community — “meaningful interactivity” or “dialogue” (see page 4) — amongst learners, beyond that developed in the classroom. For some learners it did, but many were indifferent or unaffected. Thus, while the pedagogical benefits of asynchronous CMC appear sound, the findings of this study suggest that these benefits arise less from community (rapport) building and more from catering to the differing learning styles of contemporary tertiary learners.

Indeed, the question on learning styles elicited a spread of preferences amongst both learner cohorts. Moreover, the significant role of learning style is corroborated by the posting rates obtained for the e-discussions. On average, only around one in seven language learners and one in three non-language learners contributed postings each week to the course e-discussions. Given the broad acknowledgment of the positive learning benefits from the learner open comments, this would indicate that a significant number of learners are gaining value from merely browsing the e-discussions or ‘lurking’ (Haythornthwaite, 2000, p.11; Salmon, 2000, p.29). Learning styles vary and this extends to the CMC context. While community rapport may not necessarily be further promoted by e-discussions, the positive learning outcomes would nevertheless still justify its utilisation (English & Yazdani, 1999, p.12).

Overall, there appeared tentative acknowledgment of the pedagogical benefits arising from the utilisation of CMC *as an adjunct to* FTF learning (Felix, 2001, p.6). This study shows that considerable demand for FTF learning persists amongst language learners in particular, suggesting that concurrent reduction in FTF contact on the introduction of CMC components requires some careful deliberation by instructors (Felix, 2001, p.6; Joyce & Young, 2000, p.92). As Taynton (2000, p.132) observes:

students are justifiably unconvinced that online discussion is superior to face to face contact ... [T]he effectiveness of online learning increases when online technologies are used in conjunction with, rather than as a replacement for, proven learning strategies such as tutorial and study groups, facilitated workshops, face to face consultation, and provision of print-based reading materials.

The potential pitfalls referred to by earlier studies of asynchronous CMC (see page 6) were not corroborated by this study’s learner cohorts. Low contribution rates, delays in postings, presence of dominating voices and lurking did not arise as prevailing concerns amongst language and non-language learners.

Finally, it is important to note that this study has only evaluated CMC’s role in promoting spoken competency. In platforms that accommodate Chinese script there may exist greater potential for developing written skills.

In sum, analysis of the results of this study has revealed that:

1. there exist pedagogical benefits in employing asynchronous CMC in Chinese language and non-language courses;
2. these benefits are more evident in non-language compared to language courses;
3. the benefits of CMC do not necessarily arise from community building;
4. CMC accommodates diverse learning styles — low contribution rates and lurking are not necessarily problematic; and
5. language learners expect more FTF learning (and so less reliance on CMC) than non-language learners.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that CMC has a practical and effective application in the tertiary Chinese language and non-language learning contexts. Moreover, as an adjunct to FTF learning, asynchronous CMC is generally well received by learners and perceived as providing positive learning outcomes. As this learning is learner-driven and to some extent collaborative, it would be expected to contribute to the development of a community of learning *for some*. However,



the study has found that interpersonal rapport and active interaction are not necessarily advanced by asynchronous CMC beyond that established in the classroom.

Results for synchronous CMC may prove different. Pena-Shaff, Martin & Gay (2001, p.63-65) have found that learners engage more actively and are more interactive in e-chat than e-discussion formats, but are often off-task. While no learners requested access to the chat tool available for their use, three learners did comment that "Maybe an online chat session on a set-date regularly could motivate more people to participate actively", "Maybe we could have something like a ICQ (in-line chat program) whereby students could exchange ideas and comments and interact with one another at the same time" and "Live chat rooms would be great". Maintaining time-limits for postings may also have encouraged participation and so interaction but, given the responses in this study, many learners may simply have opted out (Hammond, 1998, p.335). Moreover, motivation for a minority will always be at issue, as exemplified in the responses: "I'm too lazy to respond to the Q's" and "I keep forgetting to do them".

Palloff & Pratt (1999, p.159) state that "[e]lectronic pedagogy ... is about developing the skills involved with community building among a group of learners so as to maximize the benefits and potential that this medium holds in the educational arena". While this study has demonstrated the pedagogical benefits of asynchronous CMC with regard to learner perceptions of learning outcomes, its role in community building appears less certain, especially amongst language learners. It is hoped that future research will elicit strategies for optimising electronic pedagogy's role in community building, particularly in the tertiary language learning context where the potential appears so considerable yet results to date remain indeterminant.

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## Appendix 1

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**2001 STUDENT EVALUATION OF WEB COURSE**  
COURSE NAME \_\_\_\_\_

- Circle the comment that represents your response
- Take as much time as you wish to answer
- Do not identify yourself anywhere on the survey form

SA strongly agree  
A agree  
N neutral  
D disagree  
D strongly disagree

### Web course — general

1. The web course was well organised	SA	A	N	D	SD
2. The website was user-friendly	SA	A	N	D	SD
3. The website was easily accessible	SA	A	N	D	SD
4. I had technical problems using the website	SA	A	N	D	SD

5. I like it when course materials are provided as regular handouts	SA	A	N	D	SD
<u>Individual responsibility for learning</u>					
6. I like being able to edit and add material to the website lecture notes	SA	A	N	D	SD
7. I often added my own notes to the website lecture notes	SA	A	N	D	SD
8. Web delivery encouraged me to rely less on the formal lectures for my learning	SA	A	N	D	SD
9. I prefer formal lectures	SA	A	N	D	SD
10. I felt lost having to organise some of my learning by myself	SA	A	N	D	SD

### E-discussions

11. I like the flexibility of e-discussions	SA	A	N	D	SD
12. E-discussions are more relaxed than in-class discussions	SA	A	N	D	SD
13. The e-discussions were interesting	SA	A	N	D	SD
14. E-discussions allowed me time to think about my opinion on a topic	SA	A	N	D	SD
15. There was an adequate balance of in-class and e-discussions	SA	A	N	D	SD
16. The e-discussions were not well organised	SA	A	N	D	SD
17. Students should have to contribute to the e-discussions within a set time-limit (eg. 3 days)	SA	A	N	D	SD
18. I prefer face-to-face tutorials	SA	A	N	D	SD

### Learning community

19. The e-discussions and website mailbox made it easy for me to discuss things with my classmates outside of class	SA	A	N	D	SD
20. It is good being able to continue in-class discussions in the e-discussions	SA	A	N	D	SD
21. E-discussions made me feel more 'part of the class'	SA	A	N	D	SD
22. I learnt very little from discussing things with my classmates outside of class	SA	A	N	D	SD
23. I prefer to learn on my own	SA	A	N	D	SD

OPEN COMMENTS

- I. What did you find most useful about the web course?
- II. What don't you like about web delivery?
- III. What did you find most useful about e-discussions?
- IV. What don't you like about e-discussions?
- V. What improvements would you suggest to the web course and e-discussions?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR VALUABLE COMMENTS!